

## LOCAL AND REGIONAL

# Growing young in Summit County

Duane Pearsall, developer of the first low-cost smoke detector, plans to keep active in retirement

By LU SNYDER  
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DILLON — There is a little bit of Duane Pearsall in most American homes these days.

Pearsall and his company, Statitrol Corp., invented the first battery-operated and commercial smoke detectors — by accident.



Statitrol was the second company Pearsall founded, with the

intent of entering the static control market. But as he and his staff were making static control devices, they stumbled upon a characteristic of smoke and ions, which led them to develop the first smoke detector made in the United States.

Statitrol changed its focus from static control to smoke detectors and was soon recognized as a leader in the market, Pearsall said.

"We actually created a vacuum in the market," he said.

Pearsall and Statitrol



Summit Daily/Brad Odekirk

Dillon resident Duane Pearsall shows off one of his inventions, the first low-cost smoke detector. Pearsall was also a Navy pilot.

remained in the business for 15 years before Pearsall sold the company to Emerson Electric. By that time, there were more than 50 companies in the market.

The invention of the smoke detector was without a doubt the high point of Pearsall's multifaceted career, he said, as smoke detectors have saved more than 100,000 lives nationally in 20 years.

The accomplishment also won Pearsall two awards, of which he is particularly proud. In 1976, President Gerald Ford presented Pearsall with the National Small Business Person of the Year award. In 1980, the Society of Fire Protection Engi-

neers recognized him as Fire Protection Man of the Year.

Worcester Polytechnic Institute also awarded Pearsall with an honorary doctorate of science for his development of the smoke detector. But the smoke detector years was only one part of Pearsall's career. Before that, he was a Navy pilot during World War II, an engineer with Honeywell, a technology and manufacturing company and the founder of Pearsall Corp., a commercial air-handling business. Pearsall retired when he sold Statitrol in 1978, at age 56.

It was the first of three retirements.

The year wasn't up before

Pearsall had started another company — this time offering consulting for small businesses.

In his free time, Pearsall lobbied for small businesses and succeeded in prompting the National Chamber of Commerce to establish a small business council.

He has testified in front of the Senate, House and federal trade commission for small businesses, he said.

He retired from consulting five years later only to start a new career as a venture capitalist.

"In its early stages, it should have been thought of as America's secret economic weapon because it's been the source of development of major technologies," Pearsall said. "Overall, it represents some \$30 billion a year going into new technology development."

He was a venture capitalist for 10 years before retiring for the third and final time.

"You could say this is my third retirement, and it's going to take," he said, laughing.

Pearsall and his wife, Marjorie, left their dream home (which they felt had gotten too big) in Denver and moved into their condominium in Dillon. It overlooks the reservoir and the Gore Range, but the scenery isn't what keeps Pearsall in Summit County — it's the people.

"Here's a community where people getting old don't sit around complaining about their ailments," he said.

"They're out skiing, hiking or doing something productive."

Among 81-year-old Pearsall's passions are skiing, sailing, biking and hiking. He even competed in the senior Olympic games (in slalom and figure skating) for several years.

"I stopped competing two years ago because there was no competition," he said. "All you had to do was show up and you got a gold."

When Pearsall isn't outside sailing, hiking or skiing, he and Marjorie are usually spending time with their grandchildren. They have seven grandchildren altogether — two of which live in Breckenridge. Pearsall is using what little time is left over to write an autobiography.

"At the rate I'm going, I'll never get done," he said, laughing.

All in all, Pearsall's pretty satisfied with his careers and accomplishments. If he were to do it all over again, he would only change one thing.

"I think I might have hung on to (Statitrol)," he said. But it's not about the money. "I really felt that we had a family-type organization. It was a fun thing."